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IWU Announces Winner in High School Composers Contest

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--An 18-year-old Floridian is the winner of the first High School Composers Contest sponsored by the Illinois Wesleyan University School of Music.

Franklin Gross of Boca Raton took first prize in the contest, which was sponsored as part of a year-long celebration of IWU's 150th anniversary.

Gross submitted two original compositions entitled Nocturnes of Youth and Pastorale and Fantasy. Gross will receive a \$250 honorarium. His music also will be performed at the 2001 IWU Symposium of Contemporary Music, Feb. 28 and March 1. He will perform the pieces on Thursday at 8 p.m. in Westbrook Auditorium, 303 E. University Ave., Bloomington. Gross will receive \$500 for travel expenses to come to IWU for the symposium.

This year's featured guest composer at the symposium is William Bolcum who won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for music. He is sought by many orchestras around the world for commissions. He has composed music for the Vienna Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Berlin Domane Musical and the Lyric Opera of Chicago and others. Bolcum's wife and vocalist Joan Morris also will participate in the symposium.

Gross's interest in music began six years ago while visiting a friend who played the guitar. "I asked my father to buy me a \$10 guitar at a garage sale, and my father told me that if I stick with it, I could get a better one," Gross said. "We've now collected nine guitars covering acoustic, electric and classical."

Gross later applied to the Alexander W. Drefoos, Jr., School of the Arts, but two weeks before his audition he learned the school did not accept guitarists for auditions. Gross explained, "My Dad found information about a local piano teacher named Harold Brown, and he said, 'Let's see what Harold can do with Franklin in two weeks, and hope that the school will see his potential and let him in.' During the audition I still played some guitar, but I had to perform well on the piano...Initially I was put in a waiting list, but later was accepted."

Just a few months after beginning piano lessons, Gross started composing songs. His teacher, Harold Brown, encouraged Gross's composition efforts.

The IWU High School Composers Contest is not the first where Gross has won prizes. He won first place in the Florida Federation of Music Clubs contest and won first place twice in the Florida State Music Teachers Association. He also has been a consistent scholarship winner at many competitions and festivals. His recent performances include the Miami Festival of Discovery Exceptional Student Recital and the Greater Miami Youth Symphony Orchestra. Moreover, at the Florida Federation of Music Club State Audition in Avon Park, Fla., he won three first place and three second place awards.

Gross enters numerous contests each year. "I like to enter as many contests as I can, both in composition and performance," he said. "Winning is always nice, but I enter competitions to see what the results are, to question the results, and to see how I can improve. Often times the judges give back comment sheets so I can directly see what they thought and I enjoy getting the feedback."

Gross found out about the IWU music contest through one of his private teachers, Donald Waxman, who is a composer himself. Gross knew that the IWU High School Composers Contest would not be like other contests he had entered. He said that his teachers told him, "The judges would be looking for pieces that were well constructed, well thought out and that the judges would want to get into the head of the composer."

"I wanted to enter because I knew this contest would be a great opportunity," Gross said. "Part of the prize would be to fly out to the university and play with a well-known figure. I really wanted to win and though I thought it wasn't likely, I really wanted that opportunity."

Mario Pelusi, director of the IWU School of Music, said, "We were looking for technique, musicality and craftsmanship. After reviewing all the submitted scores and recordings, Franklin Gross's pieces stood out among the large number of submissions."

Gross spends about 30 hours a week at the piano. "Sometimes it's more than that," he said. "If I have a major competition coming up, I may stay home from school and practice. One time I stayed home all week in preparation for a competition that weekend."

For Gross, composing has two major aspects. The first aspect he describes as, "Something that comes naturally, whatever I feel...it is a reflection of me." The second aspect is more difficult for him he said, and something he has acquired through his studying with Harold Brown and Donald Waxman. "It is the intellectual aspect, it is where the structure of the music is formed," he described. "A piece of music can be filled with feeling but unless it has structural basis it can get to be non-sensical."

Gross said, "Other composers often search for ideas and find them because they want to and in a sense they make them up. The way my music comes to me has always started with something very natural, I do not have to sit at the piano and search for a theme I do not already have. For example, I do not have to decide what key the piece should be in. Rather, the music comes to me." Gross said that Waxman always tells him, "Sometimes you don't compose music, music composes you."

When asked how he feels when referred to as a prodigy, Gross is clearly uncomfortable with the notion. "I don't feel like one," he said. "Somebody with talent should always remain honest and critical of their talent, and continue to build on it throughout their life," he said.

"Beethoven was a genius but the reason his music is so popular and so loved is because he understood life and he felt the way all of us do and translated that into a language of music," he said. "A genius is not very useful unless he or she also enjoys life and remains simple in many ways."

The only other family member who is involved in music is Gross's great aunt Elizabeth Furcron. She was a pianist who attended Julliard and performed at New York's famous Carnegie Hall. She also wrote music for Burl Ives.

Gross thanks his parents and teachers for his success. "I can't say enough about my teachers. I'm very lucky to live close to Harold Brown and Donald Waxman," he said. "I spend a lot of time and am very comfortable with both of them. I am very honored to be studying with them." His parents also are supportive. Gross said, "They make a lot of sacrifices. They have to hear music all day in the house. They fill out an endless trail of papers and forms and help me out with a lot of the behind the scenes work at all my competitions."

As Gross finishes his senior year at the Alexander W. Drefoos, Jr., School of the Arts, he is making plans for post-high school life. He hopes to get a performance degree at a conservatory of music and then a composition degree. Gross said, "My basic dream is just seeing myself in the future playing and writing music, and performing for people who enjoy listening to it."

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